

NEW YORK TIMES

1 February 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

Weinberger, in Error, Says Soviet Downed Own Missile

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 1 — Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger told a Senate committee today that the Soviet Union recently "shot down one of their errant missiles that was on its way at least into Finland." But Defense Department officials said later that he was mistaken.

Mr. Weinberger was apparently referring to an incident Dec. 28 in which a Soviet missile, which Moscow said was being used for target practice over the Barents Sea, veered off course over Norway and crashed in Finland. Moscow subsequently apologized to Finland and Norway for the episode.

The Defense Secretary twice made the assertion that the missile had been shot down during testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was hearing testimony on President Reagan's plan to develop a defense against incoming missiles. Mr. Weinberger said the incident was a demonstration of what he said was the Soviet Union's ability to defend itself against incoming cruise missiles.

Spokesman's Statement

But his spokesman, Michael L. Burch, said of the missile: "The Secretary did not mean to imply that it was shot down by a Soviet airplane over Finnish airspace."

"What the Secretary is trying to say is that the Soviets are working on a cruise missile defense system. It is within the technology. They can do it, and we can do it."

Administration officials familiar with intelligence information about the Soviet Union said today that they were unaware of any data that would suggest the Soviet Union scrambled fighter planes to intercept the errant missile.

Mr. Weinberger's remarks came one day after a British newspaper, citing unnamed "authoritative" sources, reported that the Soviet missile was a cruise missile that had been misprogrammed to fly toward West Germany, and that it had been shot down by two Soviet MIG interceptor planes. The newspaper, the Daily Express of London, said the Russians had used the "hot line" to inform United States officials of the mishap, but the incident was kept quiet to avoid jeopardizing arms control talks.

The Daily Express report was emphatically denied by officials in West Germany, Finland, Britain and the United States. A spokesman for the West German Defense Ministry, Lieut. Colonel Norbert Huebner, was quoted as saying that the missile "was not capable of covering such a distance." A Finnish Army spokesman, Lieut. Col. Antti Mustonen, told The Associated Press that the newspaper report had "no basis whatsoever."

Mr. Burch said this evening that the

Defense Secretary "in no way intended to confirm the false report in the British newspaper."

He added: "We know it was not shot down. It apparently crashed. It either flew into the ground or it ran out of fuel."

Mr. Burch had no explanation for the secretary's remarks except that he was trying to press home the point that both nations have at least a rudimentary ability to stop cruise missiles.

Tail Section Reported Found

Finnish searchers reported today that they had recovered the tail section of the fallen Soviet missile in a frozen lake. Pentagon officials said they had been informed by the Finnish Government that, as the Soviet Union had said, the missile was an older generation drone and was not armed with a warhead.

Secretary Weinberger made his comments about the missile in response to a question from Senator Claiborne Pell, Democrat of Rhode Island.

Senator Pell, questioning the Defense Secretary on the Administration's plan for a defensive system against nuclear missiles, asked whether such a system would not be vulnerable to attacks from low-flying cruise missiles.

Mr. Weinberger replied that "there are other defenses against cruise missiles which we are working on and which the Soviets are working on."

He added: "The Soviets demonstrated their defense against cruise missiles a couple of days ago when they shot down one of their errant missiles that was on its way at least into Finland."

Later in the afternoon, responding to questioning about the proposed anti-missile defense system from Senator Larry Pressler, Republican of South Dakota, Mr. Weinberger said: "The Soviets have already demonstrated one method by shooting down their cruise missile that somehow got away from them and was starting to work its way across Norway and Finland."

Pressed by reporters, Mr. Burch declined to characterize Mr. Weinberger's remarks as a misstatement, saying only, "I have issued a subsequent statement to clarify his statement."

Two Administration officials, speaking on the condition that they not be identified, said today that the Defense Secretary's remarks were a mistake.

"He didn't mean to say that," said a senior Pentagon official. "That was not the fate of that missile." Another Administration official familiar with intelligence sources added, "they could not have shot it down. They didn't control it anyway. They were trying to control it and failing. They may have blown it up."